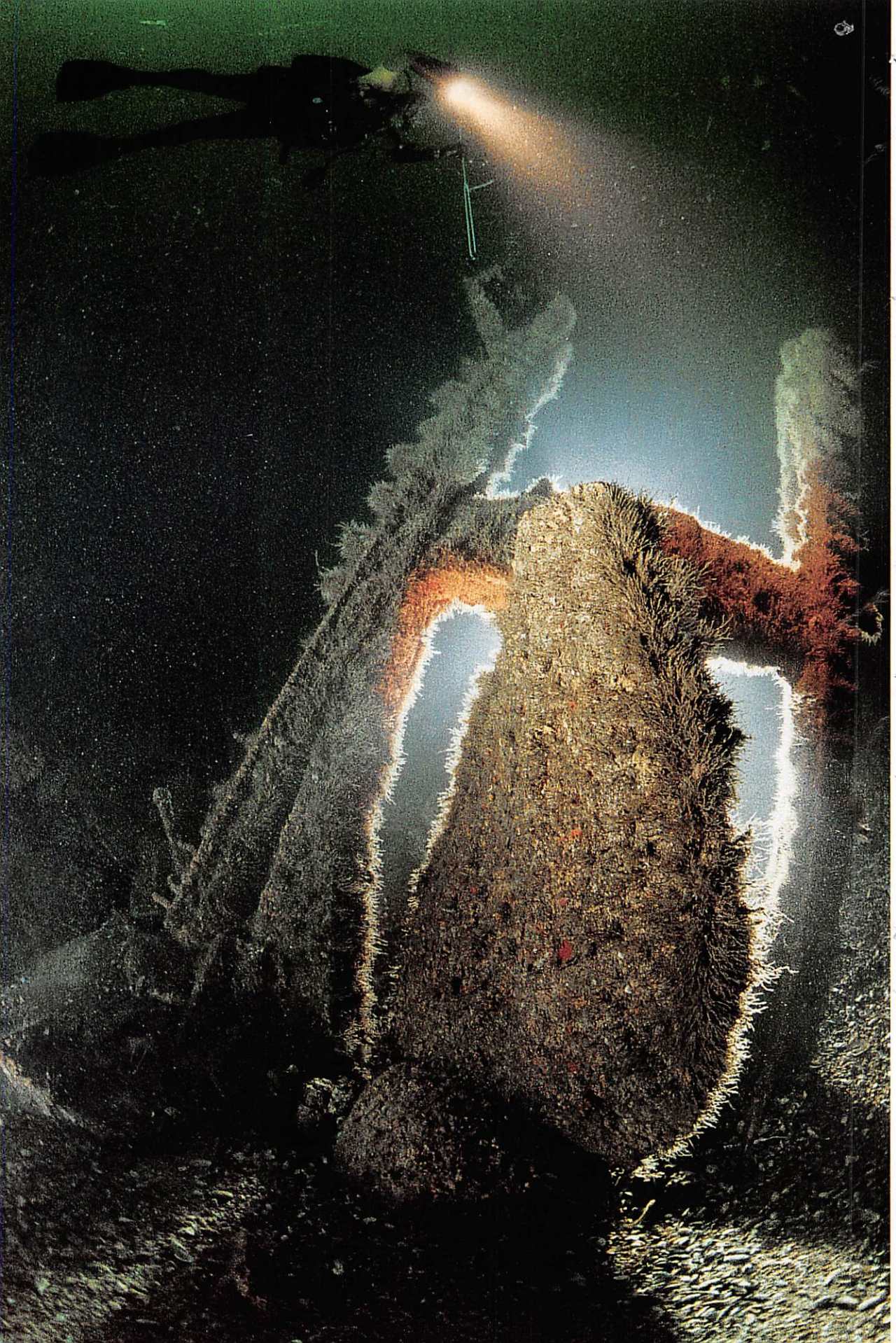


USA Civil War



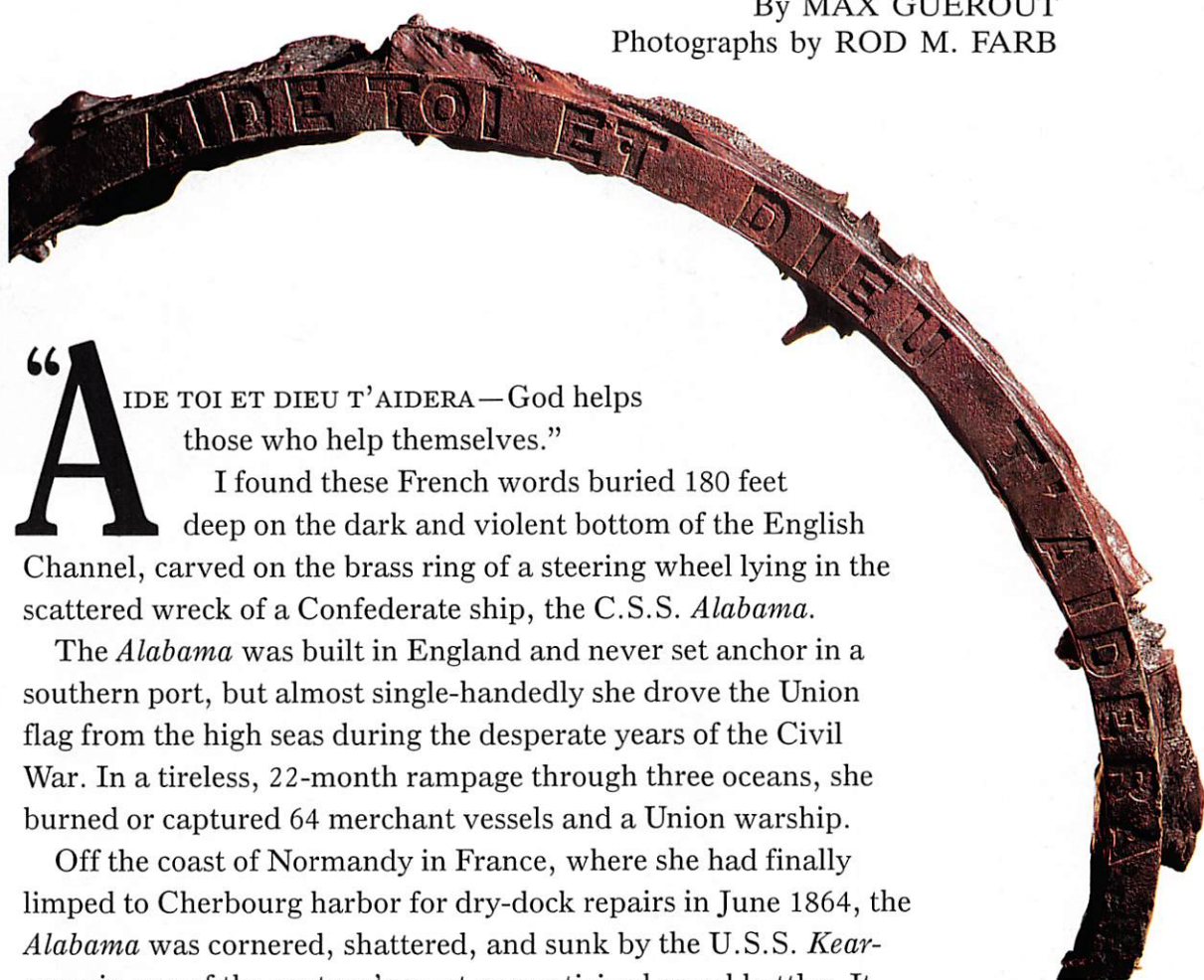


THE WRECK OF THE C.S.S. ALABAMA

Avenging Angel of the Confederacy

By MAX GUÉROUT

Photographs by ROD M. FARB



“AIDE TOI ET DIEU T’AIDERA—God helps those who help themselves.”

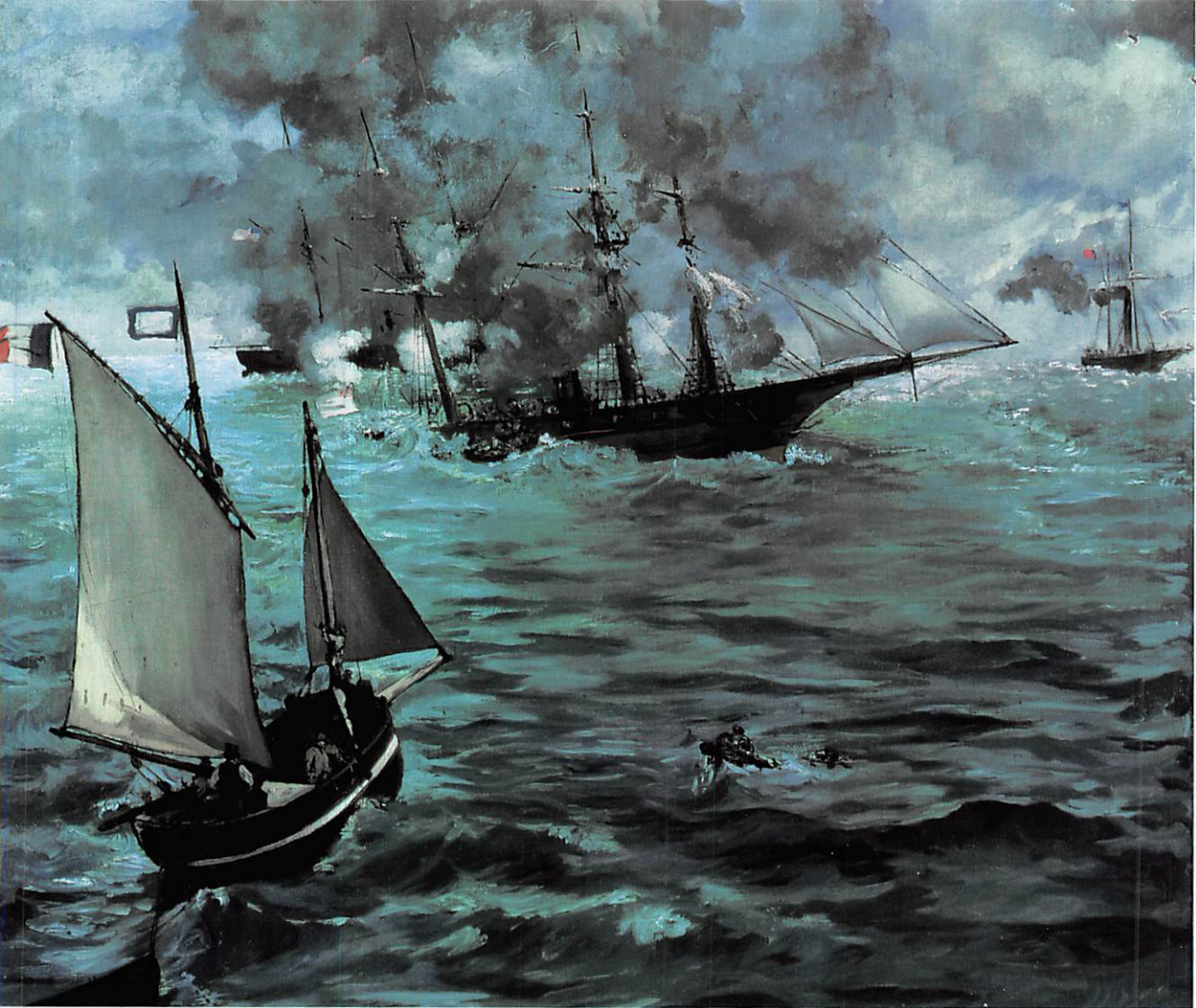
I found these French words buried 180 feet deep on the dark and violent bottom of the English Channel, carved on the brass ring of a steering wheel lying in the scattered wreck of a Confederate ship, the C.S.S. *Alabama*.

The *Alabama* was built in England and never set anchor in a southern port, but almost single-handedly she drove the Union flag from the high seas during the desperate years of the Civil War. In a tireless, 22-month rampage through three oceans, she burned or captured 64 merchant vessels and a Union warship.

Off the coast of Normandy in France, where she had finally limped to Cherbourg harbor for dry-dock repairs in June 1864, the *Alabama* was cornered, shattered, and sunk by the U.S.S. *Kearsarge* in one of the century’s most romanticized naval battles. It was the last gunnery duel in the era of wooden ships, when

With a French motto whispered in brass, a ship’s wheel ring found near a half-buried propeller identifies the Confederate raider Alabama—sunk off France in 1864 and lost for 120 years. French and American volunteer divers and archaeologists now struggle to salvage her remains.

VICTOR BOSWELL (ABOVE)

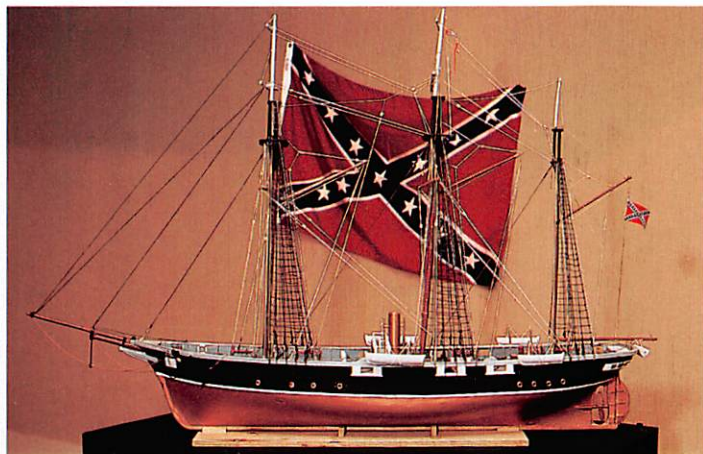


PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART; ALFRED C. HOWLAND, U. S. NAVAL ACADEMY MUSEUM (BELOW)



men glared at each other at point-blank range with unsure weapons and—with overtones of chivalry—took mercy on survivors and honored each other's officers.

The *Alabama* stirred passions long after the Civil War ended. In 1872, following a historic international arbitration in Geneva of the *Alabama* Claims, Great Britain was forced to pay 15.5 million dollars to the United States as compensation for the destruction of ships and cargoes by the *Alabama* and other British-built Confederate raiders.



Alabama had the "grace of a swan," wrote her captain, Raphael Semmes—but she preyed like a raptor on Union merchant ships. She was finally defeated by the U.S.S. Kearsarge, a Union man-of-war that sank her off Cherbourg, France. Some 15,000 people lined area bluffs (lower left), hoping to glimpse the battle that raged several miles offshore. Édouard Manet, said to have watched the fight from a boat, painted *Alabama's* famous death (upper left). She lost 21 men. Wounded survivors made a votive model of her (above) for a local church. "It is inaccurate," says Claude Jennet, who restored it. "But it was built from the heart."

For 120 years the *Alabama* was considered lost. The water was too deep, the currents too wicked, to consider salvage. But in October 1984 the French Navy minesweeper *Circe*, under command of Bruno Duclos, discovered an unknown wreck seven nautical miles offshore. French minesweepers, still clearing World War II debris, had been looking out for the *Alabama* for years; a search of the battle area had become part of their training.

Retired French Navy captain MAX GUÉROUT is chief archaeologist for the C.S.S. *Alabama*. ROD M. FARB, a photographer based in Cedar Grove, North Carolina, is currently working on his third book about shipwrecks.

Duclos launched a small, remotely operated underwater vehicle to take photographs and finally dispatched scuba divers to the seafloor. An iron chimney stood in the semi-darkness. Coal was scattered about, as well as 19th-century English china made in Staffordshire. They had found the wooden hull of a warship of the industrial age.

As excitement mounted on both continents, the French Navy called on me to confirm the wreck's identity. Was the *Alabama* really within reach? And whose ship was she now?

Britain, France, and the United States all had a stake. The U. S. had assumed other assets of the defunct Confederate States, and some Americans wanted the *Alabama* as a symbol of southern honor. The British wanted *Alabama* artifacts and a replica of the ship for a dockside development in Liverpool. But the wreck was situated well within today's 12-mile limit of French territorial waters, and the people of Cherbourg had developed an emotional attachment to the *Alabama* and her cause. The battle seemed as much a part of French history as American.

TO MANAGE the project, the C.S.S. *Alabama* Association was formed, headed by Ulane Bonnel, then president of the French Commission for Maritime History.

In the summer of 1988, while waiting for the diplomatic debate to resolve, we began our evaluation of the wreck under a permit issued by the French Ministry of Culture and Communication, together with such American experts as William Still and Gordon Watts of East Carolina University.

The cold, murky, and hazardous waters of the English Channel allowed us a dive season of only two to three weeks in early summer. The current ran from three to four knots, like a swift river that changed direction four times in 24 hours. Divers could work only at slack tide, which lasted about an hour, and then for only two 15-minute periods.



C.S.S. ALABAMA Rebel With a Cause

When the *Alabama* was commissioned in 1862, her orders were to "attack, subdue, scuttle, and take" Union merchant ships. She obliged. Over 22 months and 67,000 nautical miles she destroyed or ransomed 64 vessels. Insurance rates soared, further withering northern commerce. By the time *Alabama* reached Singapore in 1863, Union ships had flocked to neutral ports like

cowering birds, and "there was no such thing as flushing them," wrote Semmes.

A bark-rigged steam sloop, *Alabama* cruised under sail to conserve coal. Crew lowered her funnel (A) and hoisted her propeller into a well in the hull (B) to reduce drag. She would approach an enemy ship disguised with a false flag, board it, take supplies and prisoners, and leave it in flames.

